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Fall 10-1-2004

Writing Sample

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Includes "THE LAKE," "And Impossible," "The mind of Paul Celan," and an excerpt from BAR FLAUBERT.

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Recommended Citation

Stamatis, Alexis, "Writing Sample" (2004). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 113.
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ALEXIS STAMATIS

Three poems and a novel fragment

I.

THE LAKE

A'

Be careful - he said,
there's a lake in the north, a great fountain
where words gurgle up,
and a handle there,
that governs the flow
so they plunge again,
to the bottom, onto the impenetrable green of the deep;
the words are naked, and the water there,
endlessly whirling, circles the floating wetsuits,
stocked with sulphur and bismuth,
while the voices couch upon the water lilies, for the frogs to laze at noon.

And rafts there, on the water,
tied to rounded buoys, with cotton binding the planks,
and bones, in stacks, upon the rafts,
and windflowers,
and voices, wet and swollen,
emerging from the foam,
and in the mist the voices rise, deep red,
while pale clouds descend from above,
and rain pelts the voices, clinging to the cyclamen,
and it is night

B'

Often the waters gyre within, underground,
as if they were sullied and are now made pure,
and the shoreline shifts, and the lilies surge up,
brimming with toads and voices
and a thick whisper emerges from the lake,
a stifled cry, a souging

water wallows in the pit,
 and weds the earth to clambering,
 and the tumult enfolds the trees,
 draping the branches, and the sap glistens
 in the tangle of water and sound,
 in the swamp, sulphur and evening.
 when beasts sharpen their claws on their skin,
 and tadpoles sprout twigs on their scales,
 and mammals roar amid the bracken,
 and the wind is rabid, when a bolt brightens the land,
 and a bare-breasted form appears like chiselled stone,
 and stands amid the tempest, shivering.

C'

And she's bundled in a sheet, a chiton,
 I can't be certain and stands under the downpour with tousled hair,
 water glistening on her brow,
 she stands in the power of the night,
 with the glossy lake before her,
 as sounds embrace her ankles, and enshroud her body,
 her eyes open to the east,
 the lake always approaching in the dissolving light and dark.
 and each time,
 when the rhythm of her breath shatters the husk,
 each time,
 when a black stone appears,
 all the lake is blood.

And Impossible

to Giorgos Heimonas

Think not
 Think nothing
 Just look at your hand - cut off at the wrist-
 Writing
 A lone girl with sweeping hair is gathering flowers in a meadow
 Her name is Lilith and she's singing

*When you crave for something you don't mind if it's true
 Each of us lived the death of another
 Each of us died the life of another
 Happily stalling for time
 He had told me so:
 «there's a swan trapped in the well*

I can bear it
Its words are taut veins snapping
Blood makes room for more blood
There's no other method but you it seems
With few costly shapes
Nothing should enchant you but depictions recognisable and general
Landscapes that roll and open
nature's religion is its very existence
The eternal, self-evident Present»

A cobweb
Cannot seal
The weeping that opened the world
Is more important than the snare itself
In and out of the game whoever can
Is saved for a while
The best are caught first
And disappear
The others nestle in a cocoon
They learn where the world is happening
On the cold surfaces of niches
And you too
All books end on your lips
And begin when the kiss is over
But you aren't enough; I want to touch you
And it's impossible

The night's chemistry returned the words
 To the narrator
 The girl disappeared and he was left alone
 He, both hero and narrator
 Who can only act and not suffer

I order words from the body's stock
To name - to erase - to rediscover things
Unfiltered and unknit
I create a shape and the shape in turn creates me
It breathes inside me when I think of it
And instantly I know that my intellect is accidental
A wrong chord
«We 're all transient,» says the blind man to the mad king
And he replies
«How far is the end if you can't see
The middle of the void, that blood-oozing pupil
While you're learning the void attenuates and widens
Life's a tiny door
And behind it is a crimson thorn with a silvery bug atop
I live in endless grief

And impossible»

He got up
And walked to the window
Outside it was raining

Someone entered my soul tonight
He was a caster of demons
With sad eyes, plaintive eyes
He was afraid of the sea
He was brilliant but naive - always in a hurry
This time business
Is no easy matter;
How heavy has been anguish since the beginning of time
Tons and tons and a gram of rising bubbles
I give up - as one, useless-
Someone, somewhere, is listening to me
For him
Yes, for him
Who doesn't exist
I give up

the dead are many - their bodies lying in the skating rink-
Their souls leave cracks on the ice
And above are mirrored the punishing skates
But you are well versed in this art
You, both narrator and hero, and you write
You know how it is when we're not in this world

And impossible

The mind of Paul Celan

Drawn from language
Celan's mind, full of sulphur
whirls in the waters of the Seine
eaten into
by reality
and hungry Parisian vermins

On the riverbed it strikes against a rock:
a mound of seaweed
topped by a cathedral
or rather a creedless basilica
made of drowned man's nails

A starfish is entangled in the brain
 stitches everywhere to prevent matter from spilling
 thought moistens like something vegetal
 and the mind quivers and separates

Celan's mind, alive and breathing
 goes to the bottom
 with an orange peel
 stuck on it
 with nail scratches
 real nails in pores of imagination
 colour discolours in the river's inner lips
 hooked on a poem Celan's mind sinks and expands

II.

From *BAR FLAUBERT*

*"We dance around in a ring and suppose,
 But the secret sits in the middle and knows"*
 Robert Frost

In memory of Yorgos Heimonas

CHAPTER 1

KILL DEAD TIME

Kill dead time

I was down below, exploring her. My tongue teased the rival skin, twisted it, smeared it with its warm lubrication. My mind wasn't in it though. My thoughts raced off, elsewhere. At some moment, my gaze fell on the facing wall. It was my wall, marking the confines of my room. Three candles were burning in the silver candelabra. Their red light flooded the room. I drifted in their warm glow. Again, I looked before me; only darkness now and a dim light in the distance. I advanced. A stone door barred the entrance. I uttered the password. A crack opened in the middle of the stone. Light rain. I advanced still further. Vegetation, mountain peaks, a stream babbling. Yet it was as if nature had faded away. Everything was

black, covered in darkness, with only a dim light in the distance, a silver chink in the pitch black forest.

“That’s it... there...,” I heard her saying. As if I was being given orders through a loudspeaker, my mind was completely detached from what was happening, my body acted of its own accord, mechanically. I recall how, in the past, in similar circumstances, I would think of situations involving some rhythm, some mathematical sequence, in order to keep myself in that erotic flow. It was a good way of being there and not there without neglecting my partner. For, no matter how strange it may seem, that distance appears to have worked beneficially.

“Yes, yes, Yannis, yes...,” I heard her shout again, louder and louder, till her limbs gave way and she burst, uncontrollably surrendering her love. I took a deep breath. The room gave off a musty smell. As if a lethargic gas was escaping through the cracks in the plaster and enveloping me. When I was sure that the modest ritual was over -from her point of view at least-, I rolled to one side. I was about to sit up in bed but she, thinking that I was getting up, rushed to take me in her arms.

“Yannis... it was so good. So different! Today, it was how I always wanted it to be. It was... it was just right.”

Just right and just rot, I thought. What’s ‘right’ supposed to mean? How, when I’m not even really there, can she find it ‘right’? If that was right, then what about the other times, the few times, that is, when I was there in body and soul? How right was it then? When I was *there*, when the veil covering us made me feel our bodies as one, why didn’t she tell me just how right it was then? Just right and just rot. It was a mistake, a complete mistake. Like everything, a big round mistake.

“Do you want to sleep here tonight?” she asked, lighting a cigarette.

“Many love, I’m not ready to sleep yet,” -a trick that usually worked- “why don’t we go out for a drink?”

“Okay, I’ll go and wash,” Manya replied somewhat irritated, and she got up.

Manya was an actress. Thirty-two years’ old, red-haired, long, straight hair. Black, expressive eyes, with a blue circle around the iris. Her mouth was fleshy, slightly protruding. Slender, with slightly accentuated hips. At that time, she was playing a supporting role in a TV comedy. She wasn’t bad. She wasn’t good either.

She entered the bathroom. I went into the living room and switched on the CD player. When Manya was in the bathroom, I never went in. Not that she’d forbidden me, but after love-making, there was something that made me want to leave her alone, to leave her to wash. The wind instruments began weaving above my head. Portishead. Lyricism with sharp stabs. I lit a cigarette, switched on the TV. Trash and more trash. I turned it off. Manya emerged from the bathroom wearing a bathrobe. I didn’t like that. I said nothing. She put on her make-up, a deep line of shadow on the eyebrows, she dressed and we left.

We walked along Mavromichali Street, then turned into Asklepiou Street. The first bar we went into was the “Bright Lights”, a popular haunt that recalled a French bistro. The moment I opened the door, I spotted Kostas Anagnostou, a friend and journalist, sitting at the bar. We’d known each other for a good few years. He was salaried, at the heart of the Fourth Estate. As a freelancer, I had a somewhat looser relationship with it. We didn’t sit with him as I knew he wasn’t too keen on Manya -a stuck-up starlet was what he called her. We stayed about an hour and then we went to the bar across the road, the “Big City”, a rock bar that hadn’t progressed beyond the Clash and the Stranglers. Fortunately, there wasn’t a soul there, and so at around three in the morning, I got rid of her quite legitimately, putting her into a taxi and waiting till it had turned the corner, supposedly noting the number.

I parked the old black mini in my usual place in the cul-de-sac. Instead of going straight home, I decided to take a walk. Though it was April, Athens was deserted. The night warm. The Parliament building, beautifully lit, looked magnificent. In Harilaou Trikoupi Street, the Vovou office block seemed to be feeling the cold. Two or three transvestites on the street, and these too now part of the setting. In Ippokratous Street, on a yard wall, red-painted graffiti: "Kill dead time."

I went to bed and fell asleep straightaway, without the previous hours dripping even one wet image. It had been some time since I'd had any dreams. Quite some time.

Hot chocolate or madeleine?

It was eleven-thirty on a Tuesday morning at the end of April when I sat down in my favourite armchair in front of the balcony door. I was drinking a coffee and gazing outside. On the streets of Exarchia, the cars and motorbikes had been performing their routines since early on.

Through the open balcony door, I could see the supermarket across the street. Above the main sign, I noticed a new one in red neon: "Jacobs Suchard-Pavlidis Chocolates." I smiled. Uncle Demis' factory; the last Pavlidis was a distant relative of my father. I recalled how, when I was small -six or seven years' old-, I'd go down to Piraeus Street and dip my hands into the vat of warm chocolate; I'd completely coat myself in it and the mixture would run from my palms. Even now, in my nose and mouth, that peculiar taste of hazelnut as it blended with the dark mixture, with the bitter taste of almond and, of course, that divine invention: Merenda! For years and years, I fed myself almost exclusively on Merenda. I used to get through a jar a day. After turning eighteen, though, I cut out sweets just like that. The reason for my adult abstention from that chocolate paradise is most likely to be found in my excessively sweet apprenticeship in childhood. An age when everything comes in excess. And when you get older, you still have the recollection of that hot chocolate from your childhood that slowly melts in the mouth, a feeling that's now foreign to you, a sweet recollection, fused in the memory. A lost paradise; the only true one.

For sometimes, the recollection of a taste, even when it's not a small shell-shaped madeleine, is enough to bring back *temps perdu*.

I come from an old Athenian family. Markos Loukas, my father, is one of the most well-known writers in the country. My mother owns a small art gallery.

I lived with them until I was twenty-three, until, that is, I graduated from university. Afterwards, I went to the U.S.A. for postgraduate studies in Comparative Literature, began a doctorate which I never finished and returned to Greece to do my military service. After a round of two or three years working in private schools and colleges, I gave all this up just before turning thirty, took on some private lessons and began writing for various publications. In order to supplement my income, I work for some magazines -as a freelance writer; from interviews and features to cultural news and travel articles. Apart from all this - given that I had a good relationship with foreign languages, fluent English, Italian and German, and a little Spanish- I also undertook translation work for a small publishing company.

Writing is my great passion. Living in a house where the wall was synonymous with the bookcase -even the bathroom was full of books-, it was only natural that my immune system wouldn't be able to resist the writing virus. I can't say my father exerted any pressure on me. On the contrary, he was quite against my decision to concern myself with literature.

Eventually, as might be expected, I couldn't resist the temptation to publish my creative endeavours. Four years ago, I published, at my own expense, a collection of short stories, which, despite getting a couple of favourable reviews -reads smoothly, original topics-, didn't sell more than three hundred copies.

What I always wanted, though, was to write a novel.

In appearance, I'm reasonably good-looking. Tallish, one eighty-five, brown hair, a thin face, green eyes, narrow arched eyebrows, a slightly crooked nose and, when I laugh, some funny lines that form around my mouth, rather like parentheses, making my delight appear forced - which it isn't.

As with most people, there's something about me that I don't like. I don't like it at all, I hate it, I'd like to be born again just so it wouldn't exist. And worst of all it's an imperfection that can't be put right. It's an unequal distribution. A genetic quirk led to my being born with my right arm roughly eight centimeters shorter than the left. No one in my family could ever give me a satisfactory explanation for this. Eventually, I set about investigating it on my own. There was no sign of this anomaly in either of the two families, at least for four generations back. The problem began to appear at around twelve, when my right arm suddenly stopped growing. The left continued to develop till I was seventeen, when the present difference of around eight centimeters became fixed. The first shock came with basketball, at which I was especially good as a playmaker. The ball no longer obeyed my commands, I could no longer easily perform my famous reverse dribbles, while my baseball passes, that used to reach their target with goniometer precision, now urgently required projectile correction. My skill had been forever amputated to the extent of eight lousy centimeters. During the same period, when the difference was now visible to the naked eye, my schoolmates began to make fun of me: -"hey... Loukas... you clown..."-, but, fortunately, it didn't last long. The years at high school passed uneventfully, except for the second field of embarrassment after basketball: girls. When the flirting began around the first class of high school, I'd always offer my left hand whenever I was introduced to a girl. Of course, that resulted in the girl being taken aback at first and ended up working against me, since it invariably provoked the question: "so you shake with your left hand, do you?" The problem would come out into the open, and in the worst possible way, through an unsuccessful cover-up attempt. After quite a few tragi-comic episodes, I decided I'd offer my right hand, cleverly making sure to "withdraw" the left so the difference wouldn't be so obvious, at least at first sight. The techniques I developed were numerous, based for the main part on some form of *trompe l'oeil*, on delusion -I acted somewhat like a Renaissance painter-, crooked stances, imperceptible raising of the left shoulder, bending of the spine to the right, a whole load of tricks so that the girl would see the two limbs as equal in length as possible.

After some time, after Nana, that is, my first girlfriend, who never attached any importance to the matter, I began to reconcile myself with the problem. Naturally, I was always obliged to take my pullovers, jackets and shirts to the dressmaker's to have the right sleeve shortened. There were many people -and I'd checked this closely- who didn't notice it at all, but just as every complex is its owner's sole companion, so I too can't recall a single day in over twenty-five years when I haven't been concerned, albeit in passing, with this tiny imbalance, this clown gene inserted in a generally sound, well-shaped body.

I often reflected that whatever you are, it's always too little; however, it's this too little that from an early age shuts you inside a class shell: alienation.

I came to know love as a factory more fascinating than its products. Only on two

occasions did I follow the process to the end. The first time, which lasted for four years, from twenty to twenty-four, was with Elda, a fellow student at university. We didn't put in very many appearances at the lectures; we were always going on trips and going through various emotional dramas that would end in exhilarating sex.

The second long-term relationship began when I was thirty-three and is still in progress, six years to the good. Her name's Anna, she's an art historian, ten years younger than me. We met one Friday afternoon at the opening of an exhibition at the National Art Gallery. I'd gone alone, I was in no mood for company and all I wanted was to see for the first time from close up the works of my favourite painter, a French impressionist who used hardly nothing but pastel.

The paintings were each better than the other. The subjects were much the same: scenes from ballets, moments from the opera, horse races and, above all, young women. Women holding chrysanthemums, others holding anemones, women in the bath, women in the countryside. Despite his being a French painter working in Paris, the eastern influences were more than evident.

Once I found myself looking at a painting that left me ecstatic. It was a woman sitting naked in an armchair, with her back turned. Her torso was leaning forward, her right arm was resting on the back of the armchair, while in her left hand she was holding a towel with which she was drying her hair. The drawing was in pastel, with firm, sweeping strokes. My interest focused on the bones of the spine, which were sticking out of her back like an animal poised to attack. Yet, although the dominating element was the twisted skeleton, it was something else that stole the show. A delicate hand, almost separate from the rest of the body, was gracefully holding the cotton cloth, reminding us that this delicate creature had just finished one of the most noble acts of the race: her personal hygiene.

At that moment, I felt a warm breath right behind me. I turned round; a tall, slender girl with a pretty, intelligent face and black hair cut like a boy's. She was standing so close to me that it would have been rather silly not to have said anything. Before I could think of anything, the girl went straight into the attack:

"A woman drying herself. Progressive for the time, isn't it?"

"Yes," I replied, putting the catalogue into my bag to gain time. "I like the way the artist has captured her. An uncommon perspective. I like that element of the unusual."

"Do you like unusual women?" she asked again.

"I like what isn't easily comprehended," I answered with a smile.

"Why do you think she sat up?" she went on, unrestrainedly.

"Perhaps he didn't understand..." I stammered.

"What didn't he understand?"

"What she wanted... herself?"

"Why, don't men ever understand?"

There was an embarrassed silence and I had recourse to my last resort for regrouping my forces. I lit a cigarette.

"Well?" she said.

"Hang on a moment, we still haven't been introduced," in order to gain a little time. "My name's Yannis, Yannis Loukas."

"Mine's Anna, Anna Rigopoulou." A smile like a pink brush stroke lit her face.

Pretty girl, I thought.

The rest was what you'd expect. A year of fervent passion that I drank to the very last drop. A passion that I experienced in all its aspects. I lived through its transformations, its cataclysmic intensity, its tiny liquid drops as they evaporated. Her body was a landscape

without end, a Russian doll that continually donned new garments, each more beautiful than the last. Though all this lasted twelve months. When it eventually came to an end.

It came to an end and the passion faded. Just as with a bang it had been born, so with a salvo it expired, and I resolved myself to the fact that that was it, that it was destined to go on for as long as it had lasted. What remained was a pleasant feeling that, for my part, turned into a kind of erotic resignation. A resignation that spread to other areas of my life and became second nature, a way of life. *I went through the motions out of habit.*

I didn't break off the relationship. Anna and I remained rather like friends and lovers at the same time. She was my worldly companion, an unofficial fiancée. She'd realized the change in my feelings, though she seemed to have accepted the new situation. I was sure that Anna suspected that there were other women in my life, but she never let it show. An undefined sense of duty kept her with me, a sense of devotion that patiently awaited its reward. But I was already gone, elsewhere. And this city was full of the opportunities that, albeit occasionally, give flesh and bone to that indefinite elsewhere.

I drank the last sip of coffee and went into the living room. I switched on the computer and went straight to the previous day's file.

Whatever is decoded dies

After an hour and a quarter, I lifted my eyes from the screen. The text was before me; it covered three pages, nine hundred and twenty-five words. I'd send it to *Law 2000*, a lifestyle magazine. I printed it and began reading:

...He opened his eyes. For a while he didn't know who he was, where he was, what he was. A 180-degree panning round the room brought him to his senses. The objects were known to him, the air familiar, the smell recognizable. Yes, he was Nikos Marinos, thirty-four year's old, single, a journalist. It was one-thirty in the afternoon and he had just woken up on his living room couch in a two-roomed apartment in Metz, on that day, July 4th, his birthday, with a head heavy from his intemperate beer-drinking of the previous night.

I went on reading the next pages that described his chance meeting with an old girlfriend, the recollections from their summer holidays of two years before, his invitation to her to have dinner together.

I read it again. It's not bad, I thought and I saved it onto a floppy disk. *Law 2000* had asked for a two-thousand word article on bachelor life.

I picked up the phone and dialed the number of the chief editor:

"Hi Dimitris, it's Yannis. I've finished the piece, I'll send it to you."

"Okay, Yannis. Daniel will have to have a look at it too."

"If it's accepted, the fee's the same, right?"

"Yes, sure, a hundred gross, bye then."

In recent years, this had been one of my two main sources of income. Regular contributions to two magazines, less regular work for two more. The two standard magazines were *Law 2000* and *Individual*. I'd been at high school with Daniel Trandafyllides, the publisher of *Law*. He was a tough kid who went around on a motorbike. As a student, he'd got onto coke and all the rest, eventually getting clean after a period of post-graduate detoxification in France. Being smart as he was, he soon grasped the spirit of the times -you had a good time, the level of enjoyment was always one inch higher, you jumped but never reached it-, and he

published three highly successful magazines that sold like mad.

As for my literary concerns, they were at that time confined to editing my father's autobiography. The ultimate goal, my novel, was a work constantly in progress. Or, to be honest, constantly in a state of postponement. For a good few years, I'd simply abandoned whatever I'd begun.

In the evening, I was awakened by the sharp sound of the phone ringing. At the other end of the line was Dimitris Papadopoulos, the chief editor at *Law 2000*. Daniel had not approved the piece.

"I'll send you some paid ads that need editing," said Dimitris, trying to sugar the pill.

It was the third time in succession that the same thing had happened. I wondered why. I admit that it wasn't one of my best, it wasn't like the ones I used to write three or four years earlier, but with that kind of writing, you're walking a tightrope. Nevertheless, the fact was that I desperately needed the hundred thousand drachmas. I also wasn't very happy about the rejections. I decided to go and speak directly to Daniel.

Just a month previously, *Law 2000* had moved to a post-modern four-storey building in Kifissias Avenue, one of those that for some incomprehensible reason incorporate fragments of ancient Greek art in their facade. I went up to the second floor and gave my name to the secretary; a man strangely enough. After about ten minutes, the fellow announced that Mr. Triandafyllides was waiting for me.

Daniel was standing in front of his desk.

"How are things, Yannis?" he said, welcoming me cordially.

"I've been better, I murmured, and planted myself in an armchair.

Daniel sat down on his designer leather throne. The entire wall behind him was covered with a smoked-glass mirror, thus putting his interlocutor in the unenviable position of having to speak while gazing at his own reflection.

"What's that then, Daniel, some kind of post-modern interrogation?"

"A little test for my colleagues. The insecure ones keep checking their appearance, the self-confident are indifferent."

"Then I've most likely failed, because I've already noticed that I'm getting fatter," I retorted ironically.

"That's the trick. It's a special mirror that enlarges the reflection by twenty per cent."

"You're a satanic one all right, a real Manson of the press," I said, pretending to be serious.

Daniel laughed out loud.

"You've a way with words, Yannis, pity you're not able to write so well of late."

"That's just what I've come to see you about. Is there some problem, Daniel, you've rejected my last three pieces."

"Look, you're not new at this game. When you began, you remember what I told you. That your writing is in the forefront, your angle's new, exactly what every editor dreams of. You have to admit though that lately you've come to a standstill. Or rather... you've taken a step backwards. In this business, you have to be always moving forwards. You have to be on top of what's happening out there, and I mean globally, and chose whatever's hot, whatever's up front. Then you have to dissect it, fragment it, extract the essence. Today, Yannis, whatever is decoded dies. Instantly. Look how the young kids are writing. You have to break up the text, experiment with the syntax. We have to dismantle words in the same way we dismantle images. Whereas you've begun to paste them together."

"It's true that I've reached something of a limit. It's not in me to butcher either time or words. Okay, I've got stuck. Perhaps... It's my father's autobiography too. I'm tired of

rummaging through his archives. But why am I telling you all this...," I said, seeing him adopt an expression that showed I'd got off the topic. "What do you care," I went on, "you've got plenty to be pleased about... apart from your Orwellian practices" -I glanced in the mirror and Daniel laughed- "you're just fine. That's just how you were in school, a finger in everything... Do you remember how I was, Daniel?" I asked, looking him straight in the eye.

"Do I remember? Of course, I remember..." he replied, lowering his gaze.

"Well, I haven't changed at all. That's how I am now," I told him.

An uncomfortable silence fell in the office. Something flickered in Daniel's eyes, but it immediately faded. I was comforted by the fact that, albeit momentarily, he was still able to show his feelings. Of course, he soon regained his composure. The emotional interlude was over.

"All right, Yannis, I understand. We're friends. You're going through a rough patch. But here we're talking as colleagues. Everybody has a block at some point. Just don't let it get you down. Get on top of it so it won't get on top of you..."

"Don't worry, no one's going to get on top of me. Message received and understood. So long, Daniel, take care," I said and got up out of the armchair, casting a last glance at my inflated reflection.

That evening, Anna had a family engagement. I phoned Kostas, my journalist friend who hung out at the "Bright Lights". We arranged to meet there at around eleven thirty.

"Hi there. What's that smile for? Pleased are you because you trounced us again?"

"Can't say I didn't tell you. You lost it on the right wing. Yannakopoulos, Mavroyennidis."

"Our turn'll come. We'll see who's laughing come the end of the season."

"At least the team's doing well, because everything else is..."

"Oh, so we're feeling in the dumps and remembered our old friend. Is that it?" said Kostas sarcastically.

"I'm not joking, lately everything seems to be going wrong."

You know what you need, Yannis? A bit of excitement. You're forty this year aren't you?

Born in 1958, no?"

"Yes, July 4th, Cancer with Leo for horoscope."

"Come off it, that's for old ladies. What matters is that you've got yourself into a rut, old friend. Same old tune year after year. Articles for magazines, wracking your brains to come up with topics, trying to adapt to every bloody style. That's not for your age, old boy. Either find a steady job and get it into your head that that's what you'll be doing for the next twenty years, or make a new start. Begin something new. And bear in mind that what I'm saying doesn't only apply to your work. I've seen you at night out with the starlet. Why are you wasting your energy, Yannis? What's that little slut got to give you that Anna can't give you?"

"She gives me what Anna can't. And I get from Anna what I can't get from her."

"Sounds to me like you've been taken in by all that stuff you write in your magazines. I thought you kept a distance..." said Kostas.

"Listen who's talking! With a new girl every other week..." I retorted, moving into the attack.

"Yannis, you keep making the most screwed-up mistake. You project yourself onto others. Me, old friend, I'm not you. I believe in what some wise bloke once said: love is the overestimation of its object. I don't want love, I want to screw, I'm not searching for anything through writing, I make money, I'm not imaginative, I'm realistic, I fly around truth and I don't get burned, you dive straight in and become kindling. So let me get on with it in

my own way and you see to it that you make some changes in your life. Anyway, let's have another drink. I've had enough of all this soul-searching bullshit."

Kostas and I stayed until late, downing the drink. At around one, I bundled him into the car, drunk as he was, and took him home. Then I went back to my place and flopped onto the bed. I couldn't sleep. Between two and four, I watched *The Old Man and the Sea* on cable TV. Then I spent most of the night awake, thinking about Kostas' eyes, the fleshless backbone of the swordfish caught by the Old Man, and my own eight missing centimeters.

The autobiography

When, on approaching the milestone of his seventieth year, my father decided that he should reveal the course of his life to his readership, he realized that it would be an extremely tiring task, considering that this was a man with a compulsive obsession for hoarding whatever data might one day be useful to him. His mania for collecting naturally extended to the object of his work, with the result that the basement of the family home had been turned into a library cum warehouse.

Apart from being scholastic, however, my father was also intelligent, and so he sensed quite early on that he would need an assistant, an editor to sort through this pile of material. And because he was by nature suspicious, he knew he wouldn't find anyone better than me, someone who knew the subject and, in addition, someone who as a close relative would be under his total control. For my father, I was the personification of the ideal research assistant, who would delve into his huge archives and, always under his supervision, would classify, evaluate, and present him with the fruit of his creation, the flower of his fifty-year struggle with the written word. Reviews, unpublished stories, correspondence with other writers, interviews, notes, conference papers, drafts for novels never written and hundreds of other papers, files and envelopes had to be assiduously examined by me. It wasn't easy, but we finally managed to agree that the sort-out should be kept to a minimum and that the potentially mammoth bibliography should not exceed six hundred pages.

The book had progressed. I'd already been working on it for eight months and I reckoned that in another four months or so, my role in it would be finished. At the same time, my father was writing the text, which he showed to no one.

"It'll be a surprise for everyone," he said, "including the family."

The time had come for the additional task that my father had insisted on: the sorting out of the blue bookcase. In the same basement where that enormous amount of material was stored, in the second room on the right, there was a blue bookcase with manuscripts and typed texts -novels and novellas- sent to him by aspiring authors, something that went on throughout the course of his career.

It was Wednesday, the day of the week that I devoted exclusively to the autobiography. My father and I had a meeting about his correspondence with Nikos Gavriel Pentzikis. This consisted of ten letters, from both sides, in which a heated argument unfolded concerning whether or not the stream of consciousness technique had been successfully assimilated into Greek literature. In his letters, my father, a fanatic opponent of the inner monologue, both reviles and is reviled by the author of *Mrs. Ersi*. The expressions used by both of them would make the monks on Mount Athos want to hide their fondness for this pharmacist from Thessaloniki and make our academicians think again before confirming the rumour that had been circulating widely in the previous year, namely that my father was soon to join the ranks of the "immortals" in the Academy of Athens.

Before meeting with him, though, I had to stop by and see my father's publisher, to give him some photos that were to accompany the text.

Panos Viliotis was relatively young, considering the twenty-odd years that he'd been at the peak of the publishing world. He couldn't have been more than around fifty. Well-preserved, with long grey hair tied in a ponytail and an impeccable blue suit, he welcomed me from behind his high-tech desk. Viliotis didn't have any mirror behind him; the wall was covered with wallpaper depicting a starry sky.

"How are you doing, Yannis? It's been some time since I last saw you. When will you be through with it all?"

"I wish I knew," I replied, at a loss. "At present, I'm sorting through some letters, there's so much material, and he wants it all..."

"Yes, your father's more than a little scholastic. When do you think you'll both be finished?"

"I need another four months or so. Now, I'm about to start with all the manuscripts sent to him by young writers just after the dictatorship. There might be something interesting, though I doubt it. Most likely, he told them all where to go with their manuscripts. I think we ought to leave out the chapter on my father as an encourager of new writers!"

"What about you, Yannis, what are you up to? Are you still writing? I remember those short stories you published in *Patrol*. People said good things about them..."

"I keep trying to begin something, but it never comes out as I want it."

"The dough's in the magazines, eh?"

"Yes, something like that," I replied, letting it be understood that I didn't want to go on with the subject.

"Anyhow, if you do get anything finished, bring it to me to have a look at. After all, a little bit of post-war literary history must have been recorded on your genes."

"The DNA alphabet is more complicated than the Greek one. When our chromosomes can be decoded into bytes, then we'll be able to speak with certainty about what's recorded and where," I answered with the tone of an expert.

"Then, dear boy, nothing will be written. Novels won't be written or they'll be written by computer programmes. It's just another product, don't you agree? Did you see Kokkiades on TV? Twenty-five years' old, first appearance, best-seller, and just listen to him on literature in the next century. You'll load your computer with the characteristics of the hero, of the object of desire, of the bad guy, of the time, the type of conflict, you'll click on the narrative style of your choice and you'll choose between the thirty-three possible texts that exist. All the rest will be taken care of by the bytes. Just as we'll have 'smart' drugs and 'smart' homes, so we'll also have 'smart' novels."

"Except that the reader won't be especially 'smart'."

Panos laughed and looked at his watch:

"You get your humour from your father. Come on, then, show me the photos."

My father

"You mentioned on the phone about some phrase..."

My father took a deep puff on his pipe.

Difficult to fight with your soul. It's an unequal contest. Like all wars..."

"Like all...?" I asked.

"Wars."

"Wars?"

"Yes, civil ones. Like all civil wars."

"When did you write that?"

"I didn't write it. I felt it."

"You felt it?"

"Yes. As soon as I woke up. It wasn't a dream though. It was that tender hour just before waking. When everything is in a state of semi-inertness..."

"It must have been the after-effects of some dream. That intermediate stage between sleeping and waking."

"No doubt that plays some role. The closer a thought is at the time you wake up, the greater the effect of the dream's warmth on it. The person's at an intermediate stage, his mind is wandering in a fantasy."

I smiled:

"Just imagine if you heard another father and son talking about such things. It still seems strange to me that I've a father who's a writer..."

"It struck you as strange even when you were small... I remember you secretly watching me through the door of my study..."

"Yes. I used to think that you lived somewhere else, in a strange land. Do you remember how I liked to listen to stories when I was a boy? At first, I thought that they came from beyond the world, from where music comes and numbers... When I first realized that my dad's work was to make up stories in our own home, where we ate and slept, I got a fright! Don't laugh! It was dangerous for a boy to live in a house with a father who made up stories and heroes."

"Heroes? There are no heroes, only people. People, characters that visit me. It's a kind of co-existence," said father, who appeared to be enjoying the conversation. "When I'm writing, I can feel them moving inside me, experiencing what I experience during the course of the day."

"And when you finish the text, they go away. They go to sleep..."

"When the text is finished, it's they who belong to the readers. I'm the one who goes to sleep!" said father, laughing. "No, that's a lie, there's no sleep for me..." he went on, "after I've put the final full-stop, I go through a period of inner reflection, almost meditation, on the text. I didn't ask him what he meant. It wasn't necessary. 'I sit and observe it,' he added, 'like looking at a painting. I note the balance, the volume, the correspondences. I want the finished text to breathe with sharp gasps, to crack open without revealing its openings. And it's there, in the cracks, that I try to entice the reader, to camouflage the hole so that the unsuspecting reader will fall in. But take note! I'm referring to a reversal that of necessity has to be justified by two things: by the particular weight of the characters and by the conflicts between them. Everything, but everything, has to be justified in a novel, Yannis! It has to be a perfect, flawless construction, like a building, have the supporting structure, the elements it supports, openings, even an expansion-joint! The reader may see it all as being smooth and plastered, but inside there's a whole cosmogony: mortar, stones, bricks, cement, beams... The text's intestines have to work to perfection. Otherwise, dear boy, it collapses. It collapses and dissolves into its constituent parts."

"Reversal... Though in your last book, not every page goes hand in hand with the previous one. Everything is linear. Everywhere detailed images, historical references completely documented, you've left nothing to chance. I remember somewhere how you even describe the cut of the lawyer's clothes... The narrative is chronologically constructed. Twenty-four hours in each chapter. The entire novel covers a week. The book's like one

long procession..."

"I'm glad you see it that way. Except that, to get to the end of that procession, you have to read through some five hundred pages," my father said with a wily grin.

"Come on, I didn't mean it negatively. You know how much I like it..." I said, apologetically.

There was a sudden silence. That often happened in conversations with my father. It was an unequal silence. For him, it was 'functional', part of the flow of the conversation. For me it was embarrassment, since, while it lasted, my father never stopped looking at me, and intently too, as if he was trying to gauge the impact that his words had had on me. Even as a young boy, I remember him with his beady eyes, behind his glasses, fixed on me as if I'd done something bad. Now, of course, it was no longer Markos Loukas in his prime that I had before me. I had a seventy-year-old man full of opinion and whims.

Outwardly, he was in pretty good shape. Tall, round-faced, stocky build, with a good crop of white hair for his age, a delicate well-formed mouth; he vaguely recalled his implacable friend, Pentzikis. His health in recent years hadn't been the best, a balloon to unblock his arteries, a prostate operation, yet these hadn't seemed to get him down.

My father continued to stare at me with an Apollonian calm. Markos Loukas was not the sort a boy would want for a teacher. A cool breeze that came unexpectedly through the half-open balcony door made him shudder. I got up and shut it and, returning to my armchair, I lit a cigarette and broke the deadlock:

"When's mum coming?"

"I'm expecting her any time now."

"I haven't seen her for a long while. It must be at least a month. How time goes..."

"A month. What's a month? You young people have a strange relationship with time. At my age, time flows by somewhat differently. Mine is coming to a standstill. When the biological hand reaches fate's slot, then time will point to my allotted hour."

"Dad, I don't want you thinking like that..."

"Look, Yannis, I've always been a realist. Even in my collection of short stories, back in '65, when all the critics had a go at me -what's up with Loukas, the characters aren't convincing, the structure's unsound-, even then I knew that my writing was realistic. I knew that everything that happened in the book was what the characters had either felt or were in a position to have felt. I told you, everything has to be justified. In any case, I never set much store by what the critics said..."

"That didn't stop you writing critical reviews yourself. All those years you wrote for *Narration*..."

"Don't forget that, first of all, I wrote under a pseudonym and, secondly, I chose books that I liked. I've also written libels, of course. Like in the case of that fraud, Matthaïou, in the period following the dictatorship..." said father. Immediately, I sensed him wincing, as if he'd uttered something that was forbidden.

"What fraud? Who's Matthaïou?" I asked, astonished.

"Water under the bridge..."

"Come on, tell me. Besides it has to do with our work," I argued.

"Nothing to tell, he was a strange fellow who'd sent me a text..."

"What text? Was it ever published?"

"No, thanks to me... He'd sent me a novel, God forbid... I went to a lot of trouble to make sure "Hestia" didn't publish it. He had people behind him in America. People with influence. Ginsberg, Burroughs and such like. Didn't you find anything in the archives?"

"Not yet."

“Yes, that’s one thing I most likely threw away. Anyhow. It was at around that time that we almost ruined our literature.”

My father had begun to raise his tone:

“Greece wasn’t America! We didn’t have a Dos Passos in prose; we didn’t have a Cummings in poetry. We had Karagatsis and Seferis. That’s why I fell out with Pentzikis. I’d no objections at all to free association, even Faulkner used it. But that total disintegration, no respect for anything... where’s the structure, the characters, the sequence of events? Prose is not just jumping from one thing to another. Prose is foot-slogging... you need a steady step and open eyes...”

I understood that my father didn’t want to go on discussing this particular subject.

“I suppose you’re talking about the trend in new novels after the Dictatorship.”

“New novel? That wasn’t a novel. Not even a story.”

“But there were some writers...” I began.

“Writers?” said my father, abruptly. “Only in name. I’m a writer too. But something more.”

“Something more?”

“Writer is a noun and nouns get tired of standing alone. They look for an adjective to lend them support. I’m more than a writer.”

“Won’t you ever stop talking in codes, father?”

“I like codes, Yannis, I wouldn’t have got where I have without them.”

“That cynicism,” I started to comment.

“Cynicism, Yannis, is adrenaline to an old man.”

“You’ve certainly got a way with words, dad...”

“I’ve a way with them because I used to listen to them.”

I knew what was going to follow.

“From being fifteen years’ old, I accompanied your grandfather round the salons,” my father went on unstopably. “Always just behind him. And they were all there: Myrivilis, Karagatsis, Seferis, Terzakis, Prevelakis...”

“You don’t have to tell me the story again. I’ve heard it countless times...” I said, almost pleading.

“You need to hear it and to hear it again and again. I didn’t spend all my days and nights with journals and glossy magazines... For the whole time that I was a student, for five years, I’d go twice a week to the houses of writers -your grandfather hung out with all the most interesting people- and I’d listen. I didn’t speak, I listened. I made coffee, helped the women serve, emptied the ashtrays... Only if they spoke to me did I mumble something back to them. And like that, my mind eventually opened up. Through listening. That’s how it is, literature calls for hard work. We don’t just churn out a couple of incomprehensible phrases like Matthaiou and think we’re through. That’s where the adjective comes in that I was telling you about -and don’t think I’m arrogant. But I’m more than just a writer. I’m a true writer.”

At that moment, we heard the sharp sound of the front door opening and, a couple of seconds later, my mother appeared in the living room with two large plastic bags full of shopping. A faint smell of perfume spread through the air, lightening the atmosphere. She stood at the entrance to the living room and stared at us, smiling. My mother is a tall woman, almost the same height as my father, very thin, her hair dyed a brown tint and, in recent years, quite short. Her face is slender, aristocratic, accentuated nose, green eyes, bright, a slanting scar on her forehead, the result of a car accident when she was a child. Her

movements were delicate, like those of a dancer. Her gait had something musical about it, something imperceptibly affected, as if her every movement were obeying some personal choreography.

I got up and kissed her. She gently touched her lips against my cheek. My mother, like my father, was not particularly demonstrative. Effusiveness was not something held in honour in the Loukas kingdom. Our relationship was characterized by an emotional reservation, each member kept a safe distance from the other. It was by no means a coincidence that I'd never seen my parents kissing on the lips, nor ever holding each other's hand.

My mother is best described by the adjective "indefinable". Her motherliness is faint, like a wet window-pane, I never knew where I was with her, at times I felt her clinging to me like an oyster, without leaving me any space to breathe, at others like a limpet pried free and sinking to the bottom of the sea. I loved my mother, I loved that transient emotion she conveyed to me, I loved her in the way she fluttered around me like a butterfly. Her tenderness was so special; hers was a behaviour that for many years I couldn't deal with, until I accepted it as it was, I accepted that goodwill, that discreet tool that in our relationship drew that fine line separating parent and child.

The three of us in the living-room. Was it real? All three? When I was small, I imagined my family like a large room; in which lived my parents, all my relatives and their branches, my cousins, uncles, together with my friends, my parents' friends, and my teachers. As I grew up, the people gradually began to leave. At first, it was the distant relatives, then my parents' friends, the uncles and the cousins. As time passed, among the last to leave were the teachers, followed by the friends and grandparents, till in the end there were only three of us left: my mother, my father and me. This arrangement lasted for quite a while longer, till about eight or nine years ago, when I was around thirty and when, to my great surprise, the next person to leave the room was not me, the emancipated thirty-year-old, or my father, the counterweight. It was her, my mother, who discreetly flew off into the unknown through a gap in the window, leaving us, the two men, sitting in two armchairs facing each other and silently staring into each other's eyes.

My mother didn't stay long. She was tired, all day at the art gallery and then shopping, and she wanted to go and have a lie down. I proposed that we all eat together, but she didn't want to. She didn't eat much, two mouthfuls and that was it. I sat with my father a bit longer, we discussed one or two things about the book and then, since it was already late, we postponed the Pentzikis correspondence for the next day. I said goodnight and went down to the basement.

The blue bookcase

On opening the door, a strong musty smell took my breath away. I opened the small window of the cour anglaise, cursing the criminal architects of the '50s and the concrete visions of the Minister of Public Works of the time. The basement had three rooms, a very basic kitchen and a small bathroom. The one room was filled with the dozens of items collected by my father. Some were packed into large cases and others were piled in two oak chests. The other two rooms were filled with bookcases running from wall to wall, with two in the centre of each room, thus creating three inner aisles. The blue bookcase stood out like a sore thumb. It wasn't just the colour and the material -the only one made of iron among all the wooden ones-, but also the height. It was noticeably higher than the others and reached right

up to the plaster cove around the ceiling.

It was in the blue bookcase, then, that my father had stacked all the texts that various aspiring writers had sent him over the years. I suspected that he'd never even glanced at some of them, at least those inside the old-style files, where the knot appeared untouched, as if it had never been untied. Most of them, though, appeared to have been subjected to the test according to Loukas and, of course, had been rejected to great acclaim. The few that he had approved, some nine in total, had more or less all found their way into the hands of the reading public, given that Mr. Markos Loukas was one of the chief despots of Greek literature, at least for five or six years following the fall of the Dictatorship. These occupied half the bottom shelf and had a sticker on their spine on which was written: "Prose/OK".

My struggle with the pile of rejects was obviously going to be an unequal one. Naturally, I couldn't read them all, not even a representative section of each. Besides, the only reason why I'd go to the trouble was in case that among the defeated armada there was a frigate that later became famous, having survived the first unfortunate battle at sea. I decided to begin by drawing up a list of names and titles.

After two and a half hours, I'd been through all the shelves except the last one. Two hundred and forty-four names filled seven pages of my note-pad.

Coming to the top shelf, I was now exhausted. It was that damn position, standing on the step-ladder, opening the files with my left hand and recording the information about each book with my right.

It was with some relief that I picked up the last manuscript. It was a mauve file tied with a blue ribbon. There was nothing written on the outside, neither the title nor the author. I opened it up. Inside was a note in pencil: "Matthaiou/Novel. Reject". I recognized my father's writing. Underneath was a large envelope, again without any writing on it. It contained some two hundred and fifty closely-written sheets tied with a thin string. The handwriting, though clearly legible, was very strange. The letters appeared as if carved; they stood out in relief from the tattered paper. The title, author and date were written on the first page in thick black felt-tip:

BAR FLAUBERT
BY LOUKAS MATTHAIU
ATHENS, 1975

The name seemed familiar. Mathaiou... Matthaiou. Of course, it was the same man my father had been telling me about that afternoon. The "fraud", the one who churned out "incomprehensible phrases", that my father had gone to a lot of trouble to keep from being published by "Hestia". I was seized by curiosity. I took the file and climbed down from the step-ladder. I sat down on the only chair that there was in the basement and began to read:

CHAPTER ONE

oral more
even neat

Suddenly.

Suddenly is the word. The dream comes like an oyster and sticks onto sleep's tail. I blink my eyelids at the first ray of light: the image comes unstuck, falls and is shattered. Suddenly.

In this night of the male, when the woman's inauguration is splendidly celebrated.

I arrived at the bar around twelve. 48th Avenue. The sign is in Greek: "Bar Flober". I hesitated before

climbing the steps. A familiar smell. Like a warning. The steps winding. A spiral. Wooden stars, blue and white like hooks from the curved ceiling. And a half-moon. Menacing. A flow of water. Muddy water. Mirrors, dust, heavy fabrics. And plants, dark plants, black stems and leaves, a pitch-black forest. Climbing up; discomfort. On the door upstairs, again the sign, this time in English: 'Bar Flaubert'. The association was lost. Bar Flober is one thing, Bar Flaubert another. Curiosity concerning the name. A dead white European author in the heart of New York.

Straight up to the counter. Lots of people and I don't feel comfortable with so many people. Before, because now they tell me I'm okay. The atmosphere grey, smoke; like a field of battle. The battle I'd been waging of late. My gaze straight on Andreas, the Greek owner. Standing among the guests, talking to a girl, Andreas with a light-blue shirt, a dark-blue gaze. Hardly a girl, thirty-seven years' old, twice my age, who worked in TV. She was wearing a huge earring. I went over to Andreas, who was standing with glass in hand. I was about to say something when a thin shadow passed fleetingly before me. Whether an angel or a demon, all I grasped was the moment, just a wisp of hair. That like a diaphanous kerchief traversed the air -pitch-black as it was-, I breathed her outline in its luminous aura. I stole a glance -her hair half-covered her eyes, three centimeters, oh those three centimeters! Just what was required. Andreas introduced us with some embarrassment. Her name was Leto. She was beautiful and slender and stooped as though shy. Something blind for a long time suddenly sparked. From the first movement of her head, I recognized the anger. At first I thought it was weakness, but it was anger, a dark anger, a black mound of anger, together with another emotion that I hardly knew. Only once previously had I felt it. Being a child, I didn't understand, I thought that I was responsible when the mouth twists, when the eyes glare. It's the eye, the whites of the eyes. That's where it shows. Anger. In women. For them, I'm no longer responsible. I'd replace the women in my life and christen them. With new names. She, no. We talked, I saw that she didn't look me in the eye. I saw her as we talked and her features poured everywhere, broke like the sea against rocks. And it was that night of the male, when the woman's inauguration is splendidly celebrated...

I read the first chapter in one go. I took a breath and went on with the second.

CHAPTER TWO

*Nel mezzo del camino di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita**
Dante, Divine Comedy
[*In the midst of life's path
I found myself in a black forest,
and my life as I knew it was lost]

Ten months passed. Months of stone, cylindrical ones with openings like in an aqueduct where our love surged like a wave. I felt a dizziness planted in my insides by weakness. Because it was weakness that this love brought with it, and I had to protect myself. And my protection was for me to paste together the pieces and for her to see someone devoted. Leto became frightened. She saw happiness coming and she couldn't deal with it, couldn't comprehend people and happiness together. She was shaken. And she began the dismantling, with excuses, how she was supposedly offended by that insecurity in the corner of the eye. And even fewer touches. In the past, I'd been unable to bear it. Overly-sensitive, I fell apart. Now, I was able to keep a hold. Even in love I was less and less tender. And she told me that one day she'd make me say "I love you" for real, maybe in a year's time, she said something about a lifetime, and became upset, and her truth came out, and she looked it in the eye for the first time, though she was afraid lest it consume her, lest it consume the relationship, and she couldn't deal with it; she came out in spots, on the bottom right side of her cheek. There.

She accused me of being arrogant, ironic. You're losing me she said. You're losing me. I'm leaving. And

during the day she usually left. Only at night, each one's soul visited the other in sleep. When she woke up, always before me, she calmly got out of bed and made the coffee. In the afternoon, when she came home, she got the meal ready and cleaned the house. And that's how we went on. Full of anger, we continually spouted and fell, each of us like clay into the other's cracks. And a breeze, sweet and perspiring, burdened our hearts. Just kids, not yet nineteen, we didn't wish for tomorrow, because tomorrow was a lost cause.

Nevertheless, I wasn't the one to leave. One evening when I was lying on her belly and listening. I was trying to hear something, but nothing, darkness and silence. She told me she was leaving. And just like that, she took her beauty and disappeared. Since then, I've felt as if she swallowed me up. That her tongue performed its double duty. With one word she discarded me and with one movement she swallowed me. Since then I've lived there, in the body of the beloved, with her words saliva spread over my body. For ten months I'd removed the beauty from the black forest. And beauty is always greater than humans. When it's removed, you remain less than you are yourself. I'd search for her. Everywhere...

I went on reading. When I'd finished, the first rays of the sun furtively passed through the chinks in the curtains. I left the file on the floor and remained motionless for a while. Then I noticed that at the end of the two-hundred-and-fifty-page manuscript was a typed letter. It was from Matthaïou to my father:

Athens, 15 March 1975

Dear Mr. Loukas

I'm making so bold as to send you my novel Bar Flaubert. It was written in Greece last year and has to do with my own personal experiences. I lived for many years in America, where I studied biology. In America, I met with the leading representatives of the Beat Generation: William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac. I was a close friend for some time of the first two, though we've now lost touch. My return to Greece coincided with the 1967 coup d' état and for obvious reasons I was obliged to leave for Europe. I have published numerous studies in academic journals in Italy and France, together with short stories in English literary magazines. A text of mine was also published in the Greek Magazine, Pali, in the sixties.

I would regard it as a great honour, Mr. Loukas, if you were to take the trouble to read my manuscript, and even more so if you were to give me your opinion. I would like to express my deep respect for you and my confidence in the reliability of your judgment. I have already submitted the manuscript to "Hestia".

With my most sincere wishes.

Loukas Matthaïou

PS. If you wish to contact me, you can write to me at the following address: 6 Sekeri Street, Kolonaki, Athens. My telephone number is: 722.435.

I gave little thought to the letter, as what I'd read before had left me stunned. It was only the first reading. I'd read it again and again, because what I had before me wasn't a story, it was as if someone had stuck a needle into my blood and had extracted the constituents of my most personal universe, things that even I hadn't suspected or, better, that I'd buried in the most secret crypts of my existence. It was as if I'd looked my soul in the eye.

Yes, in the eye, in the same way that I felt that this writer was looking at me. A man about whom I knew nothing, other than that twenty years before, my father had gone to great

lengths to prevent his novel from being published. Being well aware, of course, of my father's views on literature and with our exchange in the living room still fresh in my mind, I wasn't at all surprised at his reaction. Nevertheless, he can't not have recognized the man's talent. What was it that had scared him? In 1975, Markos Loukas was all-powerful. Forty-seven years' old, six novels to his credit, an associate professor at the university and a consultant editor at "Hestia" publishers, he was the leading member of the select club of seven that held sway in the Greek literary scene. What was it that had scared him in the case of Loukas Matthaïou, with whom he shared the same name, the one -the big name- having it as a surname and the other -the unknown- as a first name. I recalled his words from that afternoon: "I've also written libels, of course. Like in the case of that fraud, Matthaïou, in the period following the dictatorship... He'd sent me a novel, God forbid... I went to a lot of trouble to make sure "Hestia" didn't publish it. He had people behind him in America. People with influence. Ginsberg, Burroughs and such like... It was at around that time that we almost ruined our literature... Prose is foot-slogging... you need a steady step and open eyes..."

Those words of his concealed anger. Anger and fear. And there were very few times that I'd seen my father afraid.

My father's ex libris

By the time I got home, it was already daybreak. The impression I'd been left with from the manuscript was of a fluid text that resembled a sculpture in the making; a male figure that was indeterminable yet familiar.

I woke up at around twelve. I'd slept just six hours. I was uptight, something was needling me. I had work to do on the autobiography, on the Pentzikis correspondence. My mind, however, was on Matthaïou's hero, and on the author too. I searched through my archives in case I came up with some information. Nothing. Greek prose-writing, since the fall of the Dictatorship at least, didn't include as much as a word from the pen of Loukas Matthaïou. It was as if the man had never existed, at least as a prose-writer.

I'd begun to despair, to the point that I began to wonder whether I should consider the matter closed, when I suddenly thought of Telemachus. Telemachus Anghelis was, among other things, a very well-known literary historian. A friend of mine for over ten years, he was what you'd call a walking encyclopedia of Greek literature. He was the one who could tell you what pseudonym Taktis used when out on the pick-up, in which U.S. State Seferis' American publisher was born, what brand of cigarettes Skarimbis used to smoke... I called him straightaway on my mobile phone and we arranged to meet that evening in Kolonaki.

Before that, however, I had to see my father - not only about the autobiography.

I found my mother at home alone. My father had gone to the local café.

"I don't see much of him," she said in a melancholic tone, "he prefers the café with his friends..."

"A little men's talk is good for him," I said, reassuringly.

"Your father's changed, Yannis, he's become grumpy. He's growing old and becoming difficult."

"Just between us, he always was a bit eccentric."

"There's his work as well.... But now it's getting too much. He's full of his own ideas and whims, he wants everything to be just as he wants it. It's so tiring. It's lucky I have my own

outlets... What about you? How are you getting on? Is it progressing? Is that folder for him?"

"To tell you the truth, it's actually about that folder that I've come. It's a novel that someone had sent to father in '75 and he rejected it. One of the few things that have spoken straight to my heart. And I don't consider myself easy to please as a reader."

"Who's the author?"

"You can't possibly know him. Even I don't know very much about him. Just his name and some information contained in a letter to father."

"What's his name?"

"Matthaiou. Loukas Matthaiou."

My mother, who all that time had been holding a cup of coffee, put it down on the table. She turned her gaze to the front door as if waiting for something.

"What... do you know him?" I asked.

"The name sounds familiar... I can't recall..."

"Mum, if you know something, you'd be helping me a great deal..."

Her intuition proved right as, before I was able to continue, there was the sound of the keys in the door and in walked my father, carrying the newspapers and two magazines.

"You'll have to excuse me. I'm going to change, I have to go to an auction," my mother said, leaving the room.

"What's wrong with your mother, Yannis?" my father asked when she'd gone. "She looked a little pale to me. Don't tell me you had a fight?"

"No, we didn't have a fight. Sit down. I want to talk to you."

My father sat down on the couch. I made myself comfortable in the armchair facing him. The afternoon light fell slantwise across his face and boldly outlined his features. He didn't look very much like my father. I noticed the two slanting lines that, starting from the base of his nose, reached down to his chin, as if wanting to delineate the area of his mouth, to accentuate the two lips that were as fine as a woman's. A charming dissonance in an otherwise manly face that beneath thick, grey eyebrows concealed two restless eyeballs, glinting from behind myopic lenses. Above, in the centre of his forehead was a birthmark, the family seal, proud and perfectly round. A circular concession on the part of the skin, roughly a centimeter in diameter, as if positioned precisely on the central vertical of the notional axis joining his eyes' two irises. A biological *ex libris*, a third eye, an additional controlling mechanism, superior even to that of the family gaze.

"Dad, I came across Matthaiou's novel in the blue bookcase," I said, showing him the file.

My father seemed momentarily taken aback; he instantly recovered his composure, however.

"Matthaiou? Oh, you mean that hack writer we were talking about yesterday..."

"Well, I find his work extremely interesting and I'd like you to explain that hatred that I sense you have for him."

"Hatred? What hatred? The man was useless, I'm telling you. You may like those ravings, but you'll do me the honour of allowing me to disagree. A hotchpotch of materials all thrown together."

"Come on, I know you, you're as stubborn as a mule. Though mum didn't seem to be too keen on him either."

My father's third eye flickered.

"What, was it him you were talking about?"

"We weren't talking about him. We were cut short. Anyway, what could mum tell me about Matthaiou?"

"Absolutely nothing. Your mother, dear boy, has not the slightest interest in literature. The only things she's bothered about are exhibitions and auctions. The people she associates with are all from the art world. She only has anything to do with writers when they invite us round for dinner. I have to admit though that it worked out well for us like that; it means we're not treading on each other's feet. At least, not often."

"Dad, you're avoiding the issue. There's more to it than that," I said, applying a little pressure.

"Listen," he retorted, "I've had enough of the matter. If that kind of pulp fiction is your cup of tea, then good luck to you. *De gustibus non disputandum...* I've said all I have to say about the man."

"You haven't told me anything. I want to know where he is now. To talk to him."

"Right, let's put an end to this once and for all, Yannis. After I'd read his monstrosity that you find so marvelous, I replied to his letter, giving my frank opinion; that it would be better for him to put down his pen and go back to the laboratory; he was a biologist or some such thing. His case even prompted me to write an article in *Narration* on the new trends in prose-writing following the Dictatorship. Since that day, I've never heard of the man again, nor want to."

"But what happened? He can't just have disappeared from the face of the earth."

"I don't know. I told you, I wasn't in the slightest bit interested... Now, let's drop it shall we... Are you ready to start on the correspondence? Not that I'm particularly fond of Pentzikis, but at least the man knew about literature."

I didn't pursue the topic. My father was annoyed, angry almost. Something had happened concerning that man, Loukas Matthaïou. I had to find out more."

I decided not to mention the irritating name again. The day went by calmly, without further excitement. We decided on which letters to include in the book and did whatever censoring was necessary, my father even wrote a short prologue. I left him in the afternoon as he was getting ready for his two-hour siesta.

At home, I read the manuscript once again. The fluid material began to take on a clearer shape. It was a man's head. His features were confused. From one angle, they reminded me of my father and from another of myself, but when I tried to picture him as a whole, it was someone else, someone strange and yet familiar. I was struggling with something that I was unable to put my finger on.

Telemachus

At around ten in the evening, I was at a Leo's café-bar in Kolonaki Square. I sat down at a table behind the glass facade, ordered a vodka and lemonade and waited for Telemachus. The bar was designer chic, completely transparent with the floor continuing out onto the street.

The impeccable style of the surroundings was not enough, however, to hide the imperfections of Telemachus Anghelis, who turned up a quarter of an hour late as usual. Nature had exhausted its callousness in fashioning him. It had made him short, around one meter sixty, with an innate tendency to obesity which meant that his weight had for some years been in the three-figure range. And to add to its malevolence, it had given him a face completely at odds with his temperament, one that appeared to belong to a veteran boxer. Telemachus' malformation was, however, inversely proportionate to his character. A brilliant mind and loyal friend, Telemachus, apart from being a literary historian, was also an exceptional poet. His most recent collection, *Dust*, had been hailed as one of the best of the

year.

“Hi, Yannis,” said Telemachus, “good to see you, pal.”

“How long has it been? All I seem to recall are answering machines and messages.”

“Yeah, Yannis... Never any time, for Christ’s sake... How’s the autobiography going? Are you getting there?”

“There’s still a fair bit of work. What with my father’s demands... Just sorting through the material in the basement is going to break my back.”

“He’s kept everything, eh?”

“His favourite song is *Thanks for the Memories*,” I said, laughing. “But you come up with some pretty interesting things. And this is where I need your brains. Does the name Loukas Matthaïou mean anything to you?”

“Loukas Matthaïou... that’s a tough one.”

“You must know something. I can tell you that he once published a short story in *Pali*,” I continued.

Telemachus pulled a face, as if he’d been offended.

“I said tough, not impossible. So let’s see what we have: Loukas Matthaïou. He must have been born around ’38 or ’39. As a young lad, he went to America to study, biology I think it was, and then he got involved with the beat group, straight into the heart of the beast: Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Corso. The whole damn gang of them. I’ve heard that there was a time when the Jew made a play for him, then Burroughs did the same. He came back to Greece for a short while at the beginning of the sixties, and Taktsis helped him to get a story published in *Pali*, under another name I think. Patras... something like that. He was back here again in ’67, seems he’d decided to settle here, but it was the time of the Coup and he left. Then I heard that he’d unsuccessfully tried to get a novel published under the name of Matthaïou. After that, he disappeared from the face of the earth. I once saw him in the flesh, in a club in Kypseli in 1967, a few days before the Coup of 21st April. He was a real good-looker. I’ve never seen a man more handsome. It’s said though that was somewhat strange. Aren’t you going to tell me where you got hold of his novel?”

“Sure, I found it in my father’s basement and I read it in one go. It’s amazing.”

“I tried to find it myself years ago. A friend in America had told me about it. There’s a bit of a myth surrounding that work in certain circles abroad. And about Matthaïou too. The title has some reference to Flaubert, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, the title is *Bar Flaubert*, though it doesn’t have anything to do with the writer. Did I tell you my father had rejected it?”

“I don’t think they had much in common.”

“Maybe, but so much so that even today he still doesn’t want to hear that name... Something’s not right, Telemachus.”

“It’s very strange...”

“Listen, I’ve decided to dig up everything I can. Besides, not a lot’s happening and my personal life’s pretty much of a muchness... The whole business intrigues me more than you can imagine. I’m sure you know what I mean A text opening up and spreading out inside you... The sad thing is that I can’t find any clue, any lead on Matthaïou.”

“It seems that uncle Telemachus is going to have to come to the rescue once again,” said my old friend, laughing. “I can help you. I’ll send you somewhere. To someone who must know much more than me. At least, he must have known then.”

“Who? What’s his name?”

“Hansen. Arnold Hansen.”

Telemachus stopped for a long pause. He’d uttered the name as in a ritual and now he

was waiting. That was Telemachus Anghelis all over. He liked shooting out utterances like oracles and then waiting for them to drop. In this case, though, he was waiting in vain. Mr. Arnold Hansen was completely unknown to me.

“So, who’s this Arnold Hansen?” I asked.

You must read books from the back cover! Arnold Hansen, dear boy, is a well-known American poet and much more; he was one of the first members of the beat group, the man who typed out Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, who organized the poetry evening at City Lights when Ginsberg first read *Howl*, who arranged Gregory Corso’s painting exhibitions. And, in addition, he also acted as Samuel Beckett’s secretary.”

“Beckett... I can’t imagine Beckett with a secretary. Anyhow, that’s all very impressive, but what’s the connection with Matthaïou?”

“Like I told you, when Matthaïou was studying in America, he went about with the beat group. He was a very good-looking lad and all the gays in the group buttered up to him for his favours. Of course, Hansen knew all this at first hand. And this, Yannis, is where we get back to the matter in question. For the last fifteen years, Arnold Hansen has been living in Greece, somewhere on the Lycabettus ring-road. He lives alone in a house full of books and paintings, he’s ill -some problem with his legs- and he has no one to take care of him. That man, who’s a part of the history of post-war American literature, is growing old alone and destitute. Of course, up to a point, it’s by his own choice, he’s rather unsociable and he hates interviews and the limelight, A few of my friends and I, mainly poets and critics, visit him every so often. We stay a couple of hours, have an ouzo, and when he’s had one or two, he tells us stories from the past. You’ve no idea what my ears have heard about the various giants of literature. All of it off the record, of course. What the man wants is a bit of friendly company, something to ease his loneliness, so none of us has ever thought to take advantage of him. Back to our topic, then. I remember that, one evening, when he was talking about the beat crowd, Arnold mentioned your friend Matthaïou. It seems he knew him quite well. I think he’s the only person in Greece who may be able to help you, though I don’t really understand your obsession with it all.”

“Let’s not go into that. It’s personal. Go on with what you were saying.”

“As you wish. I can send you to Arnold, though it has to remain between us. Or, even better, I can arrange for us to visit him together. He knows your father and I know he respects him. But we have to agree on something beforehand. You won’t mention to anyone whatever he tells you. I want you to understand that. Not to anyone.”

“You have my word, Telemachus. Besides all this business is a personal affair, an obsession if you prefer, but I have a feeling that I’m on to something important.”

“Yannis, you know how fond I am of you. If your intuition takes you somewhere, follow it. I’m happy to see you enthusiastic about something at long last. Albeit about a book, a name.”

Arnold Hansen

I spent a rather boring weekend with Anna in Aegina, and on Monday morning I stayed at home re-reading *Bar Flaubert*. In the evening, I waited for Telemachus while listening to the news on TV. The main story concerned a large naval and air exercise called “Flexible Pliers”, being carried out by the Turks in the Aegean. The instigator of the exercise, a Turkish General and repressed author so it seemed, had imagination if nothing else.

[...]

Translated from the Greek by David Connolly